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Rationality, Nurture and the Creative Process in

*Frankenstein* and *Corinne, or Italy*

The text of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the text of *Corinne, or Italy* indicate that the creative process is one that seems fraught with dangers of several types, a primary one being the unknown, the inability of humans to clearly see or imagine, much less prepare for, the possible consequences of that process. Denise Gigante ‘s essay “Facing the Ugly: The Case of *Frankenstein*” indicates that this process never ends well and that when the creative process is enjoined, particularly when it goes out of prescribed bounds, what it finds is the emptiness beyond all the constructs, the “horror at the core of all existence” (567). **However, what we find if we apply Winnicott’s theory of the theoretical first feed to these texts, we may find that there is more ambiguity to the outcome of the creative process in these texts than is immediately apparent. Winnicott’s theory allows us to consider other possible outcomes to the process of creativity; in short, that creativity, when both rational and emotional, may result in other than catastrophic consequences.**

Gigante is quite right in pointing out the connection between Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, a text Shelley would have been familiar with. Though Swift’s text is primarily a political one, it clearly calls into question the ability of humans to solve the various problems that plague general populations, particularly in creative ways. Gigante references the Brobdingnag women, whose magnified bodies are ugly; clearly, the resulting knowledge from seeing them up close, in a more intimate, scientific way is not helpful. Simply *knowing* about various processes does not immediately lead humanity to anything that is likely to be pleasing or useful. Swift then goes about calling into question scientific *application* in the next Book of the novel when the character Gulliver is taken on a tour of various ridiculous “improvement” projects. These “solutions” call into question the widespread belief in the promise of the Enlightenment that applied scientific knowledge would actually improve the lot of the general public. Swift cleverly leads his reader into the idea that interest in science alone, unless guided by rationality, is of little value and may actually cause harm. The reader is then conducted to Book IV, where Gulliver desperately tries to deny his likeness to the impulsive, un-selfcontrolled Yahoos and become a horse-like Houyhnhnms, purely rational. The reader is tempted to admire the peaceful, plentiful society of the Houyhmhmns, whose rational ideas and accomplishments in government, education, and industry seem unparalleled; however, these creatures have no emotion, even at the death of a “loved” one, and, more importantly for our argument, no art, no creative process. That is to say, they are not human, and Gulliver, who endeavors to make himself over in their image, succumbs to the very opposite of rationality, madness.

The many echoes of these ideas are obvious in Shelley’s text. Clearly, Victor’s mad foray into scientific creativity is an endorsement of Swift’s concerns about the dangers inherent in such activity. Like Swift, Shelley imagines a close relationship between extreme rationality and madness. Shelley shares Swift’s skepticism about the possibilities of applied scientific knowledge, or at least about the reliance on hyper-rationality to ensure a good outcome. Rationality in a creative process, unguided by anything except an ego-driven, fevered/mad desire for exploration, has disastrous consequences. Victor’s Creation, the product of such an endeavor is the bane to Victor’s existence. However, there are a few key differences between Shelley’s text and Swift’s that suggest Shelley’s reticence to completely acquiesce to Swift’s ultimately dark and hopeless conclusion. Swift ends his novel with Gulliver quite insane; for Swift, there does not seem to be any solution to the problem of the “real” permanently intruding on Gulliver; he, who has tried to literally re-create himself and becomes both creator and created, has also met “the horror at the core of all existence” (567). Though Shelley’s novel seems to end as disastrously, there are places where the text’s description of various creative moments throughout Victor’s life that hint at a possibly different outcome.

When viewed through the lens of Winnicott’s ideas in *Human Nature*, it is perhaps possible to view Shelley’s *Frankenstein* in a different light. Winnicott proposes the idea of the “theoretical first feed” as an alternative theory of the creative process to Freud’s (ultimately patriarchal) ideas on creative generation. The “first feed” emphasizes the mother’s nurturing role in the success of the child, the creation. If the mother nurtures the child in a nurturing manner, willingly, patiently, the child can then naturally continue the process of creation by creating the breast, then go on to proper development. This process relies, not only on rationality, knowing what to do, but necessarily relies on an emotional component as well. There must be both at work in order for the child to achieve successful development. There is also an acknowledgement that the child is dependent on the mother for this process to progress. There are two particular moments in the text where we see this process gone awry. The first is when Victor’s father unwittingly pushes Victor to find his own way regarding the outdated scientific texts he is reading. In this “theoretical first feed” as a child-scientist, Victor’s father is not nurturing; rather the text describes him as “careless” in his treatment of Victor’s interest at this particularly vulnerable moment. The second such moment is the point at which Victor actively abandons the Creation the first night it is alive and then continues to abandon the Creation thereafter. The smaller act of carelessness seems to directly lead to the larger, more serious act of abandonment. However, what is interesting about the first incident is how the text lingers on the moment with Victor and his father. The text states, “If instead of this remark, my father had taken the pains to explain to me…under such circumstances, I should have certainly thrown Agrippa aside…It is even possible that the train of my ideas would never have received the fatal impulse that led to my ruin” (68). What the text seems to imply is that choice can materially affect outcome. Thoughtful agency seems possible; outcomes seem not to be predetermined.

Victor’s lack of allowing a nurturing, careful “first feed” to the Creation is even more pronounced than the one involving Victor and his father. Where Victor’s father is guilty of giving Victor’s text only “a cursory glance” (68), Victor is “Unable to endure the aspect of the being [he] had created…” (84) and runs from the room, horrified by the Creation as it begins to move, and then when the Creation is standing before him, childishly grinning, Victor “beholds the wretch” (84), but rejects it a second time, again abandoning the Creation to its own devices. The third time Victor sees the Creation, it is from a distance, and Victor says that a “mist came over my eyes” (117). In this interchange, not only do we see the failure of the parent in the thrice attempted “first feed”, but we also see again, the possibility of another outcome. The choice is put before Victor to acknowledge and accept his “child.” The Creation says, “Do your duty towards me, and I will do mine towards you and the rest of mankind” (118). Again, a definite choice that could have engendered a potentially different outcome is implied. Though the novel’s trajectory is a catastrophic outcome for Victor, the text remains, as it were, pregnant with other possibilities. Had other choices been made, other outcomes seem possible. Therefore, what the text implies is that if warm nurture, or tender emotion is allowed to guide cold rationality in the creative process, other than catastrophic outcomes become admissible.

Another example of this set of circumstances at work occurs at the end of the novel when Walton resumes narration of the story. Walton and his crew are on a journey of discovery and exploration, certainly scientific. It is cold, symbolic of the rationality that is expected to guide the process of creating knowledge. Walton’s crew becomes fearful of continuing the journey; however, Walton understands this, and decides to abandon the voyage because his rationality is guided by a nurturing care for his crew. Though Walton returns without “utility and glory” (215), without either the knowledge he hoped to create or the personal pride he had hoped for, he feels he cannot lead his crew “unwillingly to danger” (215). Though it is difficult for Walton to come to this decision, a more hopeful outcome to his creative process can be anticipated. Walton’s crew finds “the passage towards the south became perfectly free” (215), and they head toward warmer climes, physically and existentially.

Therefore, using Winnicott’s theory as a frame for the novel equips the reader to view *Frankenstein* with other than catastrophic eyes. The novel remains a cautionary tale against the kinds of creative processes that would leave out the human elements of care and nurture, but it does not necessarily damn the creative process altogether. What it calls for is perhaps a feminine kind of creativity where rationality is balanced with considered thought and gentle emotion, the kind of creative process where the creation is attended to in such a way as to foster wholesome development.

If we, like Captain Walton’s ship, head south, we find the text of *Corinne, or Italy*. The country Corinne inhabits is warm and lovely. It is a place that applauds the kind of creativity that is modest, not ego-driven, well developed, thoughtful, and balanced with proper amounts of emotion. According to Corinne, it is a place that has reconciled “the imagination with this long slumber” (32). The “ugly,” if we are to use Gigante’s term and equate it, at least loosely, to this “long slumber,” has been negotiated away or neutralized by the feminine creative environment. Further, Corinne is the embodiment of Winnicott’s emotional, nurturing creative process. Her improvisation results in a beautiful, harmonious art, unlike Victor’s piecing together of his Creation because rationality, represented by form, coexists with passion, as well as enthusiasm, or philosophical detachment, as Lokke suggests. In this novel, then, we begin with a Winnicott-like environment where there is a long history of creativity that is nurtured.

However, the art that is created in this aesthetic does seem is not completely free from the problematic. For example, it does not seem to change its environment. Corinne states “…for it is so true that in Italy one finds the breadth of outlook which does not lead to a change in institutions but allows superior minds to be forgiven inactive opposition to current prejudices” (27). Therefore, the art, which truly is beautiful, has, however, no impact but to add to or reinforce the pleasant environment that already exists. The effective power of the art is questionable. It does not change the status quo. This necessarily calls into question the efficacy of this aesthetic. Therefore, when the beautiful genius Corinne finds herself hopelessly attracted to the dark and brooding Lord Nelvil, we sense the winds of change and danger. Lord Nelvil is perhaps a stronger version of the “ugly” than Corinne has encountered before. If he is representative of a Creation of the patriarchal aesthetic, Corinne’s gentle art cannot withstand him, and she ultimately succumbs to destruction. In Lokke’s terms, Stael “suggests focusing a clear and self-conscious eye on one’s passions and desires, thus acknowledging their power and then, through an act of will, freeing oneself from them” (26). This Corinne fails to do. She is anything but self-conscious about her reactions to Lord Nelvil, does not acknowledge the power of her desire for him, and therefore can’t and doesn’t free herself from him and the ultimately destructive power he has over her. If we then continue to use Lokke’s ideas as a frame for the character Corinne, the text seems to suggest that the right ideals must be defended by the practitioner from internal forces because the opportunity for those ideals to be betrayed or swept aside is great.

Further, if as Lokke suggests, Corinne is the embodiment of the creative spirit, she is also eventually destroyed by an exterior, cold, masculine rationality. Lokke states, “Corinne enters the novel as an embodiment of enthusiasm only to be overwhelmed by the melancholy that destroys her through the agency of the beloved Scottish Oswald, Lord Nelvil” (37). Therefore, there is a duality to the causation of Corinne’s demise. As mentioned in the above paragraph, internal forces must be kept in check; however, external forces are certainly present as well, exerting their toxic influence on the creative spirit. Because of this, to Stael, Corinne’s suicide is not necessarily catastrophic. Corinne’s death in these terms is not a voiding of what she represents, but rather an indictment against the systems that destroy what Corinne represents. Corinne as the representation of aesthetic ideals is weak when placed against the overwhelming alternate patriarchal definitions of creativity. However, what needs to be transformed is not Corinne or the aesthetic she represents, but rather the system of aesthetics as represented by Oswald.

Both texts, when viewed through a feminine creative theory seem to offer another method of negotiating the creative process, one that offers the possibility of plenitude and whole-ness as opposed to catastrophe and un-integration.